



PAPER

The Twenty-Four Inch Gauge Short Talk No. 87

Summary: This short talk explains the symbolism behind the Twenty-Four Inch Gauge.

'... the 24-inch Gauge represents the twenty-four hours of the day. Part to be spent in prayer to Almighty God, part in labour and refreshment, and part in serving a friend or Brother in time of need, without detriment to ourselves or connections ...'

First Degree Working Tools

In the early editions of his Monitor (1797 and on) Thomas Smith Webb wrote:

*'The twenty-four inch gauge is an instrument made for us by operative Masons, to measure and lay out their work; but we, as free and accepted Masons, are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of dividing our time; Its being divided into twenty-four equal parts, is emblematical of the twenty-four hours of the day, which they are taught to divide into three equal parts; whereby are found eight hours for the service of God and a distressed worthy Brother; eight hours for their usual avocations; and eight for refreshment and sleep.'*¹

Time and the often witless tinkering of well-meaning, but uninformed Brethren have over the years, altered here a word and there a phrase; in some Jurisdictions it is now 'Vocations', in others it is 'we' instead of 'they' and so on.

Like most Masonic symbols, it conceals far more than it reveals. Like many, the explanation in the ritual deals only with the obvious, leaving the inner symbolism for those who seek the hidden truths of Freemasonry.

Among the oldest of man's beginnings of civilization, measurements seem to have originated among all peoples with parts of the human body - the foot, the hand, the palm, the digit, the cubit (elbow to tip of the middle finger) etc. The word inch comes (as does ounce) from the Latin *uncia*, a unit divided into twelve parts. Some contend that the origin of an inch was in the thumb joint. Both foot and Roman *uncia* are very old and our ancient Brethren of the Gothic Cathedral building age must surely have known both. But what is important is not the name of the measure but the division of the gauge into units and their applicability to time.

The relation of twenty-four inches to twenty-four hours is plain enough, but when we examine just what it is that is divided into twenty-four parts, the explanation becomes difficult.

What is time? To most of us it is the duration between two noons; the elapsed interval between any two events; the passage of a certain fraction of life.

To the philosopher, time is an unknown quantity. Like space, it appears to be a concept of the mind, without objective existence.

Modern mathematicians contend that time and space are but two faces of the same idea, like the two sides of a shield. While we can comprehend one without reference to the other, we cannot use one without the other. Every material thing occupies space for a certain time; every material thing existing for a specified time, occupies space. We pass through space in three directions - up and down, right and left, forward and back.

We pass through time, apparently, continuously in one direction from birth to death. We cannot go back for even the smallest fraction of an instant. Omar wrote:

'The moving finger writes; and having writ, Moves on; nor all Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all your tears wash out a Word of it.'

The operative workman measures his stone with his gauge; if the ashlar is too long, he shortens it. If it is too broad, he narrows it. If it too crooked to make square, he casts it on the rubbish heap and begins anew with a rough ashlar.

But the Speculative Mason, measuring his time with the twenty-four inch gauge, has no such latitude. The ruined minute is forever away; the crooked hour can never be made straight. The day unfit for the Building Not Made With Hands can never be set in the Eternal Wall, nor can the workman find in any quarry a new day to mould. Thinking of it thus, could any symbol cry a more clarion call for accuracy of labour? For skill with which to work? For care and pains in building?

'Eight hours for the service of God and a worthy distressed Brother, eight hours for their usual avocation, and eight for refreshment and sleep.'

There is no time to waste. There is no time to be lost. There is no time for idleness. Thomas Smith Webb, builded better than he knew when with so sparing a hand he laid out the Speculative Mason's time for the lighter side of life. In his concept, all such must be taken from the eight hours allotted to refreshment and sleep. He who would 'pass the time away' - he who would indulge in 'pastimes', must, according to the Monitor, take these hours from bed! To divide our twenty-four hours into three equal parts is a very practical, everyday admonition. Here is no erudite philosophy such as laborer est orare - to labour is to pray.

Nor is there any suggestion that even refreshment may be in the service of God. Again, the old ritualist knew his audience. His instructions are simple; their profundity is only for those who wish to look beneath the surface.

For these, indeed, the whole twenty-four hours may be literally in the service of God since labour and sleep are necessary for life as we have to live it, and it is a poor theology which does not teach the common lot to be the Will of God.

In 1784 Sir William Jones wrote:

'Seven hours to law, to soothing slumber seven, ten to the world allot, and all to heaven.'

Webb does not put it this way. If the eight hours for labour are also to be in the service of God, it must be labour which results in good work, true work, square work.

Refreshment of mind and body which is an offering to heaven must be clean and wholesome, if on the morrow the labourer is to be wholesome and clean for new labour, and prayer and service.

The Mason interested in a further interpretation of the three-fold division of twenty-four hours need look no further than the Great Light upon his Altar - indeed, he need only turn back from Ecclesiastes XII to Ecclesiastes III to find the inspiration of this Monitorial admonition that there is a time for everything.

We read:

'To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.'

But nowhere in the wise counsel of prophet or patriot, preacher or teacher, is there set forth a period to waste time.

Time is the very substance of life; its golden minutes the only stones we have with which to build. Every accomplishment of man, be it Temple of marble or Temple of character, act of selfishness or selfless giving to others, building a nation or building a house, must be accomplished with Time. Without time nothing is ever done. Hence he who wastes either his time or another's, squanders that which he cannot replace; which comes from we know not, whither to go we know not whence, which once gone, is gone forever.

About us are many varieties of men with as many ideas of how time should be spent. Every human being has the same number of minutes in an hour, of hours in a day, of days in a year. Some have little or nothing to show for their thirty, forty, or fifty years.

Others have great accomplishments to exhibit as the product of their time. Abraham Lincoln used all the time he did not need to devote to his usual avocation to mastering geometry, learning politics, understanding the question of slavery. Albert Pike made himself a learned scholar by constant use of spare time. These men knew what the twenty-four inch gauge really meant, how profound a symbol it is - aye, Lincoln knew, though sadly he was a Freemason only 'in his heart' and not a member of the Craft.

It provokes sober thought to apply the Masonic rule to a determination of how long we really have. Our days were in times past, allotted as three score and ten, now with the advancement in medical science it is nearer four score years. We rarely start on our life work before we are twenty. Of the fifty years before retirement is the actual time for labour, and we are admonished to spend a third of it in the service of God and a distressed worthy Brother. A third in refreshment and sleep, and but a third in labour - something less than twenty years in which to accomplish all we have to do!

No wonder so few of us leave behind a monument which will stand long enough to be seen by the coming generation, still less one which will last through the ages.

'But the harder the task, the greater the joy of accomplishment!' Much has been made of the amount of time

spent in the *'service of God and a distressed worthy Brother'* by enemies of the Craft, who have tried to read into this admonition the thought that the other sixteen hours are to be used without service to God, and that only a distressed 'Brother' is to share in our labours. This reasoning is, of course, deeply flawed. If we instruct a workman to build a wall, we mean that he is to carry the brick, make the mortar, lay the courses, level the whole, leave an opening for the gate, point up the joints - do the whole job!

Service to God, then, does not mean merely spending time upon ones knees in prayer, but living life acceptable to the Great Architect. By *'worthy distressed Brother'* we have no reason to assume that Masonry means only *'Brother of the Mystic Tie'*. Masons are repeatedly bidden to turn to the Great Light as the rule and guide of faith and practice. Here we find *'inasmuch as ye do it into the least of these ...'* And all men who believe in a common Father are Brothers. The attentive Freemason quickly notes how frequently are the Masonic allusions to work, and how few to refreshment. Our twenty-four inch gauge gives us - almost grudgingly, it seems - eight hours for two occupations of which we know one needs the greater part - eight hours for refreshment and sleep. The other sixteen are for labour, work, effort, and doing.

To him who finds labour irksome, the twenty-four inch gauge must be a painful symbol. Alas, all symbols are painful for the idle!

But for those who have learned life's greatest lesson, that the most lasting joy comes from accomplishment, the symbol is beautiful. Fortunate is the man who is happy at his daily task; discontented he who has not found his work so rewarding.

For him who likes his job, sixteen hours a day are scarce enough. Find the carpenter who carves wood in his spare hours, the book keeper who spends his evenings doing mathematics, the doctor whose leisure is spent teaching his healing art, and you hear men singing at their labours; men who curse the clocks which go too fast!

Find the Mason interested in the Ancient Craft, prompt to offer his Services for taking Office in the Lodge, for visiting the sick, doing committee work, helping the Lodge social events - and you see one happy Freemason in his Lodge.

Such men have no time to waste - all have some division of their gauge of time which makes every minute count with *'sixty seconds worth of distance run'*.

Time - substance of life! Time - gift of the Great Architect! Time - building stone for the spiritual temple! Time - man's greatest mystery, bitterest enemy, truest friend! Its care, conservation, employment, is the secret of the twenty-four inch gauge - its waste and aimless spending is the sin against which this symbolic working tool dramatically aligns the Ancient Craft.

The Scythe, emblem of Time, wins in the end. We can race with Father Time for but a little while. But we can win while we are permitted to race.

At the end, the Great Ruler of our lives is merciful! As we think of the twenty-four inch gauge and its three divisions, think also of these tender and beautiful words written of the mighty Servant, mightier Master:



TIME:

*I bring you woe and scalding tears and all life holds of sadness,
Because I am remorseless, your heart in torture pays
In bitter coin of memories of times when time was madness,
I am the passing hours; I am your march of days.
Enemy and best of friends am I to those who sorrow;
Pitiless in passing, yet Oh, so slow, so slow...
I hurry to the sleeping the greyness of tomorrow;
Sluggard in my sun-down, I never seem to go...
Little bit by even less, all pain I can diminish,
Slowly win the smile to eyes that now know but to weep.
I began your race with life, and I shall see its finish;
My arms, and none but mine, shall in the end give sleep.
I linger not for anyone, yet I may not be hastened;
You must bear your agony until I bid it cease ...
But when your head is in the dust, and all your pride is chastened,
'At long last, I promise you, I bring the gift of peace.'*

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References

1. Smith Webb, Thomas, (1818), *The Freemason's Monitor: Or Illustrations of Masonry: in Two Parts*, p.33, Cushing and Appleton, Salem.

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

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